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THE BOY, THE TRAIN, AND THE TAPESTRY

Max McDaniels pressed his forehead against the train window and watched storm clouds race across the yellow sky. With a soft pitter, rain began to streak the glass, and the sky darkened to a bruise. Fogging the window, Max blinked at his own watery reflection in the glass. It blinked back at him: a dark-eyed boy with wavy black hair and his mother's sharp cheekbones.

His father's voice rumbled beside him, and Max turned in his seat.

"Which do you like better?" his father asked with an enthusiastic grin. He held a pair of glossy advertisements between his thick fingers. Max looked at the ads, his gaze settling on the image of an elegant woman at a kitchen sink, her head thrown back in amusement.

"*Not* that one," he said. "It's way too cheesy."

Mr. McDaniels's broad, smiling face drooped. Big as a bear, Max's father had pale blue eyes and a deep, dimpled chin.

"It's not cheesy," he protested, squinting at the ad and smoothing his tuft of thinning brown hair. "What's *cheesy* about it?"

"Nobody's *that* happy doing dishes," said Max, pointing at the beaming woman up to her elbows in suds. "And nobody does the dishes in a fancy dress—"

"But that's the whole point!" interrupted his father, waving the flimsy ad about. "Ambrosia is the first 'ultra-premium' dish soap! A heavenly lather that's soft enough for the tub, but still has muscle for the toughest—"

Max flushed. "Dad..."

Mr. McDaniels paused long enough to see the other passengers glancing curiously at them. With a snort, he slipped the ads back inside his raincoat as the train came to a temporary stop on the outskirts of the city.

"It's not so bad," Max reassured him. "Maybe you could just make her smile a little less toothy."

Mr. McDaniels chuckled and promptly slid his ample bottom across the seat to squish his son. Max elbowed back as more people crowded onto the train, collapsing umbrellas and shaking the wet hair from their eyes.

Thunder shook the car and the train started to move again. The passengers shrieked and laughed as the cabin went dark. Max squeezed his father's arm, and the train's yellow lights flickered slowly back to life. The rain fell harder now as they neared Chicago, a looming backdrop of steel and brick set in stark relief against the summer storm.

Max was still grinning when he saw the man.

He was sitting across the aisle in the row behind them, pale and unkempt, with short black hair still damp from the rain. He appeared exhausted; his eyelids fluttered as he slouched low in his dirty coat and mouthed silent words against the window.

Max turned away for a moment, swiveling for a better look. He caught his breath.

The man was staring at him.

He sat perfectly still as he focused on Max with a startling pair of mismatched eyes. While one eye was green, the other gleamed as wet and white as a peeled egg. Max stared back at it, transfixed. It looked to be a blind, dead thing—a thing of nightmares.

But Max knew somehow that this eye was not blind or dead. He knew he was being studied by it—appraised in the way his mother used to examine a glass of wine or an old photograph. Holding Max's gaze, the man eased his head up off the glass and shifted his weight toward the aisle.

The train entered a tunnel, and the car went dark. A spasm of fear overcame Max. He buried his face in his father's warm coat. Mr. McDaniels grunted and dropped several product brochures onto the floor. The train eased to a stop, and Max heard his father's voice.

"You falling asleep on me, Max? Get your things together—we're here, kiddo."

Max looked up to find the car was light and passengers were shuffling toward the exits. His eyes darted from face to face. The strange man was nowhere to be seen. Flushed, Max gathered his umbrella and sketchbook and hurried out after his father.

The station was crowded with people milling to and from platforms. Voices droned over loudspeakers; weekend shoppers scurried about with bags and children in tow. Mr. McDaniels steered Max down the escalator toward the exits. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still threatening

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"Imagine a wintry day," Mr. McDaniels continued, bending over to retrieve her things while she retreated a step behind her husband. "Your nose is running, the wind is blowing, and all you've got to warm your tummy is a can of boring old soup in the pantry. Well, *no* soup is boring with Bedford Bros. Crispy Soup Wafers! Their snappy shapes and crisp crunch will jazz that soup right up and make your taste buds salute!"

Mr. McDaniels raised a hand to his forehead and stood at dutiful attention. Max wanted to go home.

Mr. Lukens chuckled. "Did I mention that Scott's a fanatic, honey?"

Mrs. Lukens ventured a smile as Mr. McDaniels shook her hand, then turned to Max.

"Max, I'd like you to meet Mr. and Mrs. Lukens. Mr. Lukens runs my agency—the big boss. Max and I are here to get a shot of culture, eh?"

Max smiled nervously and extended his hand to Mr. Lukens, who gave it a warm shake.

"Pleased to meet you, Max. Good to see a young man pulling himself away from video games and MTV! See anything you like?"

"I like this Picasso," said Max.

"I've always liked that one myself. You've got a good eye...." Mr. Lukens patted him on the shoulder and turned back to Mr. McDaniels. "I'd ask you to compare it with a favorite of mine, but unfortunately it's gone."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. McDaniels.

"It was one of the three paintings stolen from here last week," said Mr. Lukens, frowning. "The papers say there were two more stolen from the Prado just last night."

"Oh," said Mr. McDaniels. "That's terrible."

"It is terrible," said Mr. Lukens conclusively, glancing again at Max. "Say, bring Max by the office sometime, Scott. I've got a print of my missing favorite and we'll see if Rembrandt can trump Picasso!"

"Will do, will do," said Mr. McDaniels, chuckling and kneeling down to Max's height.

"Hey, sport," he said with a wink. "Dad's got to talk a bit of shop, and I don't want to bore you to tears. How 'bout you go sketch some of those tin suits you and your mom used to draw? I'll meet you down at the bookstore in half an hour. Okay?"

Max nodded and said good-bye to the Lukenses, who promptly shrank before the wildly gesticulating form of Scott McDaniels. Max clutched his sketchbook and pencil and stalked down the hall, silently seething that his dad never passed up an opportunity to talk business, even on his mother's special day.

The armor gallery was darker than the others, its artifacts glinting softly from behind clean glass. There were fewer people here, and Max was happy for the opportunity to sketch in relative peace and quiet. He strolled along a velvet rope, stopping to examine a crossbow here, a chalice there. The walls were arrayed with all manner of weapons: black iron maces, broad-bladed axes, and towering swords. He paused before a stand of ceremonial halberds before spying just the right subject to sketch.

The suit of armor was enormous. It dwarfed its neighbors on either side, gleaming bright silver inside its broad glass case. Max moved around to the other side, tilting his head up for a better view of the helmet. Several minutes later, he had roughed the basic figure onto the page.



As Max struggled to draw the elaborate breastplate, a commotion at the far end of the hall grabbed his attention. Max peered through the glass case and immediately caught his breath.

The man from the train was here.

Max lowered himself to a crouch and watched as the man towered over the guard at the gallery entrance. He made quick, chopping gestures with his hand. The motions became faster as the volume of his voice rose.

The Hound of Rowan This tall, he spat in an Eastern European accent. He held his hand flat to approximate Max's height. "A black-haired boy about twelve, carrying a sketchbook." Página 5

The guard was backed against the doorway, looking the man up and down. He began to reach for his radio. But then the strange man leaned in close and hissed something Max could not hear. Inexplicably, the guard nodded and hooked a fat thumb over his shoulder toward the suits of armor where Max was hiding.

Frantic, Max scanned his surroundings and noticed a dark doorway directly to his right. A velvet rope hung across it along with a sign that read UNDER REPAIR: PLEASE KEEP OUT.

Ignoring the sign, Max ducked beneath the rope and melted around the corner. He stood rigid against the wall and waited for his hiding place to be discovered. Nothing happened. It was several long seconds before Max realized that he had left his sketchbook in the other gallery. A wave of panic crashed over him; surely the man would see it and guess where Max had hidden.

A minute passed, followed by another, and another. Max heard the footsteps and casual conversation of people strolling past the doorway. He peered around the corner. The man was gone—along with Max's sketchbook. Sinking slowly to the floor, Max pictured his name and address penciled neatly on the inside cover. He lifted his head and cast a hopeless glance at the room that had hidden him.

It was surprisingly small for a gallery. The air was musty, and the room had a soft amber glow. The sole object within it was a ragged tapestry that hung on the opposite wall. Max blinked. As strange as it seemed, the dim light was radiating from the tapestry itself. He moved closer.

The tapestry was an ancient thing. Sun and centuries had sapped its color until all that remained were splotched and faded bands of ochre. As he got closer, however, Max noticed faint hints and undercurrents of color submerged beneath its dull, rough surface.

His stomach began to tingle as though he'd swallowed a handful of bees. The little hairs on his arm rose one by one, and Max stood still, breathing hard.

Twang!

A single thread burst into bright gold. Max yelped and jumped backward. The thread flashed like fire, as fine and delicate as spider silk. It vibrated like a harp string, issuing a single musical note that reverberated throughout the gallery before fading to silence. Max glanced back at the doorway. Patrons continued to stroll by, but they seemed far away and oblivious to the small gallery, its lone occupant, and the strange tapestry.

More threads came to life, plucked from their slumber in a rising chorus of light and music. Some arrived individually, in a sudden snap of light and sound; others emerged together in woven harmonies of silver, green, and gold. To Max, it seemed he had dusted off an alien instrument that now resumed a strange and forgotten song. The song became richer. When the last thread sang into being, Max gave a sudden gasp of pain. The pain was sharper than a stitch and was caused by something deep within him.

That something had been with Max ever since he could remember. It was a lurking presence, huge and wild, and Max was afraid of it. Throughout his life he had fought with great difficulty to keep it walled within him. The struggles caused headaches, including unbearable stretches that lasted for days. Max knew those days were over as he felt the presence burst free. Unfettered at last, it glided slowly through his consciousness before sounding deep within his being to stir the silt.

The pain subsided. Max took a deep breath while tears ran free in warm little rivers down his face. He brushed the tapestry's woven surface with his fingers.

The light and colors shifted to form golden, interlacing patterns that framed three strange, glowing words near the top.

TAIN BO CUAILNG

Centered below these words was the beautifully woven image of a bull in a pasture surrounded by dozens of sleeping warriors. A host of armed men were approaching from the right; a trio of black birds wheeled in the sky above. Overlooking the scene from a nearby hill was the silhouette of a tall man clutching a spear.

Max's eyes swept over the picture, but they always returned to the dark figure on the left. Slowly, the tapestry's light grew brighter, its images trembled and danced behind shimmering waves of heat. With a rising cacophony of sound, the tapestry erupted with radiance so hot and bright Max feared it would consume him.

Max! Max McDaniels!

The room was dark once again. The tapestry hung against the wall, dull and ugly and still. Max backed away, confused and frightened, and crossed the velvet rope into the medieval gallery.

He saw his father's hulking figure alongside two security guards at the far end of the gallery. Max called out. At the sound of Max's voice, Mr. McDaniels raced toward his son.

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!" Mr. McDaniels wiped away tears as he stooped to smother Max in the folds of his coat. "Max, where on earth have you been? I've been looking for you for the last two hours!"

"Dad, I'm sorry," Max said, hurried. "I'm okay. I was just in that other room, but I haven't been gone more than twenty minutes."

What are you talking about? What other room? Mr. McDaniels's voice quavered as he peered over Max's shoulder.

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"The one that's under repair," replied Max, turning to point out the sign. He stopped, began to speak, and stopped again. There was no doorway, no sign, and no velvet rope.

Mr. McDaniels turned to the two guards, offering each a firm handshake. As the guards moved beyond earshot, Mr. McDaniels kneeled to Max's height. His eyes were puffed and searching.

"Max, be honest with me. Where have you been for the last two hours?"

Max took a deep breath. "I was in a room off this gallery. Dad, I swear to you I didn't think I was in there very long."

"Where was this room?" asked Mr. McDaniels as he unfolded the museum map.

Max felt sick.

The room with the tapestry was simply not on the map.

"Max...I'm going to ask you this one time and one time only. Are you lying to me?"

Max stared hard at his shoes. Raising his eyes to his father's, he heard his own voice, soft and trembling.

"No, Dad. I'm not lying to you."

Before Max had finished the sentence, his father was pulling him briskly toward the exit. Several girls his age giggled and whispered as Max was dragged, feet shuffling and head bowed, out the museum entrance and down the steps.

The only sounds during the cab ride to the train station came from Mr. McDaniels thumbing rapidly through his pamphlets. Max noticed some were upside down or backward. The rain and wind were picking up again as the cab slowed to a halt near the train station.

"Make sure you've got your things," sighed Mr. McDaniels, exiting the other side. He sounded tired and sad. Max drooped and thought better of sharing the fact that he had also lost his sketchbook.

Once on the train, the pair slid heavily into a padded booth. Mr. McDaniels handed his return ticket to the conductor, then leaned back and closed his eyes. The conductor turned to Max.

"Ticket, please."

"Oh, I've got it right here," Max muttered absentmindedly. He reached into his pocket, but procured a small envelope instead. The sight of his name scripted clearly on the envelope made him pause.

Confused, Max retrieved the ticket from his other pocket and gave it to the conductor. Glancing to confirm that his father was still resting, Max then looked over the envelope. In the warm yellow light it appeared buttery, its heavy paper folds converging to pleasing corners. He turned the envelope over and examined the silky navy script.

Mr. Max McDaniels

His father now breathing heavily, Max ran his finger along the envelope's flap. Inside was a folded letter.

Dear Mr. McDaniels,

Our records indicate that you registered as a Potential this afternoon at 3:37 p.m. CST, U.S. Congratulations, Mr. McDaniels—you must be a very remarkable young man, and we look forward to making your acquaintance. One of our regional representatives will be contacting you shortly. Until that time, we would appreciate your absolute silence and utmost discretion in this matter.

**Best regards,
Gabrielle Richter
Executive Director**

Max read the note several times before stowing it back in his pocket. He felt utterly drained. He could not guess how the letter had come to be in his possession, much less what a "Potential" was and what it all had to do with him. He could guess it had something to do with the hidden tapestry and the mysterious presence now roaming free within him. Max stared out the window. Brilliant shafts of sunlight chased wispy trails of storm clouds across the western sky. Exhausted, he leaned against his father and drifted off to sleep, his fingers closed tight around the mysterious envelope.